

Costa Rica

Costa Rica can be considered the newest geographical area on Earth. The area that is Central America and connects the continents of North and South America only came into existence 15 million years ago. Costa Rica was the last link to be formed between the two continents 5 million years ago and it is still growing. Volcanoes and earthquakes alter the terrain year after year. Costa Rica has 7 of the of the Central and South America's 42 currently active volcanoes and is constantly affected by earthquakes and hurricanes.

There are no signs that large, advanced civilizations existed there before the arrival of Christopher Columbus. There was no stone architecture or writing like that which characterized the more advanced civilizations of Mexico or the Andes regions in the south. When Columbus came to Costa Rica, the people living there were mainly traders who gave him gold and pearls. Future explorers named the country "Rich Coast" (*Costa Rica*), imagining there was hidden wealth in the jungle, stored there by the native peoples. But those native traders were also warriors who would not give up their possessions or their freedom without a fight. The conquistadors that came after Columbus had to battle with the indigenous people living on the coast in a humid, jungle environment. It didn't take long for them to decide there wasn't enough gold there to make it worth the trouble. So for the first 60 years of the Spanish Conquest of America, Costa Rica was ignored.

Juan Vasquez de Coronado is the man who colonized the country for good in 1562. His plan for colonization changed Costa Rica for all time. Instead of trying to conquer the

coast and move inward, he started the settlement of Cartago in the inner highlands and colonized the country from the center outward. Most of the indigenous peoples were killed or driven to the most remote areas of the country. Those who were left were assimilated (absorbed) into the Spanish culture. Without any slaves from the native population, the colonists were forced to work the land themselves. It didn't take long before Costa Rica became a racially and culturally homogeneous (equal) country. Ticos are native Costa Ricans of Spanish ancestry who have built their country from the inside out. The nickname "Tico" comes from the Costa Rican habit of adding "tico" onto many of their nouns and adjectives. Instead of saying something is *chiquitito* (very small), Ticos say that it is *chiquitico*. The 1% of pure Amerindians that remain today still live in the remote areas of the Talamanca Mountains in the south and the Guanacaste jungle of the north.

Unlike other colonies who fought for their independence from Spain, Costa Rica was informed by letter of their independence a month after the fact and never had to raise a weapon in the fight. Central America had gained independence on September 15, 1821, but the news was a little slow getting to the Meseta Central. The bigger struggle started in 1823 when Costa Rica had to fight with Mexico to win the freedom to join the Central

American Federation with Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. Once the Federation was formed in 1824, Costa Rica discovered that coffee was an easiest and most profitable product to grow. The country also grows bananas, sugar and cocoa as their main national products and have a mostly agricultural economy. They rely almost solely on their agricultural products instead of industry as a way to make money. Coffee was so profitable that the leaders of the country encouraged only its growth and would give away land to anyone who agreed to grow coffee for sale to the *cafetaleros* (coffee barons).